Nuclear Power in Japan: The Longer View

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By Martin Dusinberre • on March 22, 2011 • in Histories of the Present

Explosions at Japan's Fukushima-Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Creative Commons/daveeza.

I imagine I'm not alone in looking at the apocalyptic images of north-eastern Japan in the last ten days and thinking, I wish I were a doctor of medicine or engineering, not one of history. Or, to put it more bluntly, a useful doctor, not a paper one.

Yet even historians have their uses at times such as these. Japan has suffered three disasters since 11 March, and thanks to the expertise of our scientific colleagues appearing in the media, most of us can now hold our own in basic conversations concerning not only tectonic plates and wave structures, but also fuel rods and cooling systems. Such knowledge is important, but we also need to know how Japan got here in the first place. Why did the only country in the world to experience the horrors of nuclear weapons in 1945 end up being the third-largest user of nuclear power by 2011?

Bald statistics highlighting the Japanese economy's overdependence on crude oil imports from the Middle East in the 1960s and early 1970s go only so far in helping us answer that question. In addition to acknowledging Japan's lack of natural resources, what we also need to grasp are the 'cultures of technology', such as those examined by Gabrielle Hecht in her study of the French nuclear power industry and post-war national identity. Moreover, with a similar focus on culture and social interactions—the bread-and-butter of historians' work—we also need to study local politics in order to understand the rise of the nuclear power industry in post-war Japan. For as Tokyo bureaucrats had realized by the time of the 1973 Oil Shock, there would be no industry at all if local communities refused to host power plants. No nuclear power industry,

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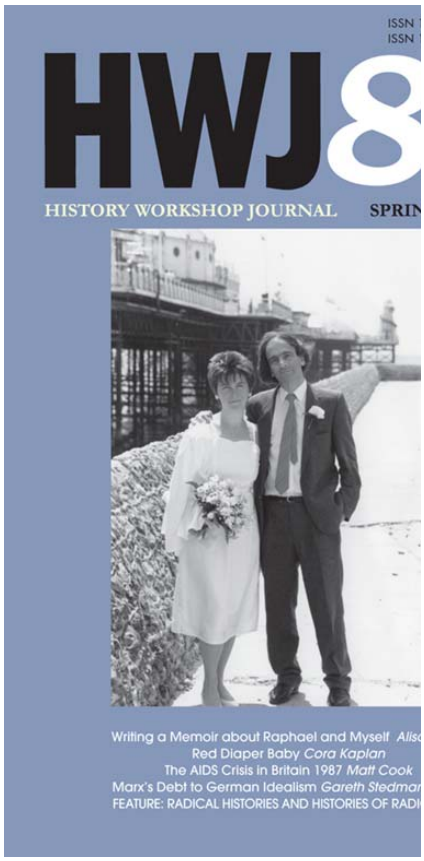

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and no high-speed economic growth.

This top-down focus on local communities in the late 1960s and 1970s was one means by which policymakers addressed Japan's so-called 'nuclear allergy'. The allergy was not only triggered by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also by the Lucky Dragon incident in 1954, in which members of a Japanese fishing vessel were exposed to radioactive debris from US hydrogen-bomb tests on the Bikini Atoll. The plight of the fishermen, one of whom died within six months, captured the imagination of Tokyo housewives in particular, and led to the formation of the anti-nuclear movement in Japan. (The Lucky Dragon incident was also the inspiration for the 1954 blockbuster, *Godzilla*.) By targeting resources at local constituencies likely to oppose the arrival of nuclear power in their back yard—fishermen and housewives, for example—Tokyo hoped if not to overcome, then at least to manage the post-war nuclear allergy.

The new regime of subsidies available to host communities, the Three Power Source Development Laws (1974), also addressed a second problem in post-war Japanese society. Economic growth from the mid-1950s onwards may have been impressively high-speed, but it was unevenly distributed. By the time of the first Oil Shock, much of rural Japan had entered a depopulation crisis. For example, Kaminoseki, the small town in south-western Japan which I've studied, lost a third of its population between 1960 and 1975 alone, as young people in particular sought education and work in distant cities. Attempts to attract new investment by major corporations failed, leaving Kaminoseki politicians and bureaucrats ever more desperate in their desire to 'halt' depopulation. In the early 1980s, therefore, they struck on the solution of nuclear power, and the first vote to request a power plant (and the central government subsidies that would come with it) was made in 1984.

This was an example of what we might call Definitely In My Back Yard, rather than the more commonly studied phenomenon, Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY). But although Kaminoseki's active pursuit of nuclear power was somewhat unusual, the arguments that made nuclear plants attractive to the majority of townspeople were nevertheless the same as those found in host communities throughout Japan. A power station would create jobs—less in the plant itself than in secondary industries, such as construction and services. Nuclear subsidies would bring new infrastructure, such as roads, schools, and care centres for the elderly. Nuclear subsidies would lead to lower municipal taxes and subsidised child care. In Kaminoseki, nuclear subsidies even funded the construction of a new town history museum.

In these ways, the debate about the pros and cons of atomic energy at a local level focused as much on questions of municipal survival as nuclear safety. In towns such as Kaminoseki, the risks posed to the community by population decline and resulting loss of identity were arguably more visible in everyday life than the abstract, future risks posed by a nuclear power station not yet built.

Even when safety issues were explicitly addressed, technological considerations were filtered by cultural and social interactions. For example, the electricity companies regularly took residents from potential host communities on 'study visits' of nuclear plants in other parts of the country. To participate in such a visit implied that one had 'studied' the issue; those who did not participate, and who questioned the scientific basis of the information on offer, could thus be labelled as having insufficiently 'studied' the issue. In the dispute between majority pro-nuclear and minority anti-nuclear campaigners in Kaminoseki, the pro-campaigners accused their opponents of lacking proper 'understanding' of safety issues. This focus on study and understanding merely polarized the debate over safety: either one understood the issue or one did not.

We should perhaps not go so far in insisting that the only true understanding of the nuclear crisis in Japan can come from studying post-war history. Nevertheless, any discussion of the post-Fukushima future of the Japanese nuclear industry will be incomplete without at least some understanding of Japan's nuclear past. The legacies of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Lucky Dragon remain on the national psyche, as does Japan's long-held desire for energy independence. But the dynamics and management of the nuclear power debate at a local level will be as equally important in determining how society responds to the nuclear crisis of 2011.

Martin Dusinberre is Lecturer in Modern Japanese History at Newcastle University. His first book, *Hard Times in the Hometown: A Microhistory of Modern Japan*, is forthcoming from the University of Hawaii Press: http://uhpress.wordpress.com/2011/03/18/

Further reading

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'Nuclear Japan and the Effects of Radiation, 1945-1960', Special Issue of *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences*, forthcoming.

Tsutsui, W. M. *Godzilla on my Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Zonabend, F. *The Nuclear Peninsula*, trans. J. A. Underwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Tags: Fukushima Japan nuclear power post-war history

2 COMMENTS

Lisa

April 4, 2011 at 1:21 pm · Reply

I happened upon this blog post while trying to find examples of historians talking about Fukushima. You might also be interested in a post I wrote over at activehistory.ca – another web collective seeking to bring history to bare on current issues: http://activehistory.ca/2011/03/from-fukushima-to-chernobyl-bringing-the-past-to-bear-on-the-future/

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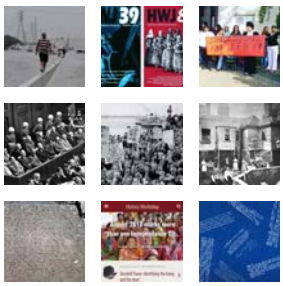

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